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ABSTRACT

Written by elementary school principals and child care experts, this guide provides parents with practical information about finding an appropriate before- or after-school child care program for children ages 5 to 13. Using a question-answer format, the guide addresses ways for parents to find suitable programs, the questions parents should ask the program director, and ways for parents to determine program quality. The guide suggests several things to look for when choosing a program, including: (1) a caring, well-trained staff with no more than 12 children to each adult; (2) safe and healthy surroundings that offer a home-like atmosphere; and (3) a flexible schedule that allows children to choose from a wide variety of activities, spend time by themselves or in groups, and be inside and outdoors. (MM)

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THE RIGHT place AT THE RIGHT time

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A PARENT'S GUIDE TO BEFORE- AND AFTER-SCHOOL CHILD CARE

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Dear Parent:

Where can your children go when school's out, but you can't be home to take care of them?

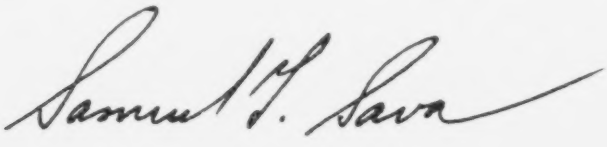
Millions of parents face this question today, as job responsibilities make it difficult or impossible for them to be with their youngsters before school, after school, on holidays, on spring break, during summer vacation...and all the other times when the schools are following one schedule, while adults must meet the demands of another.

For a rapidly increasing number of parents, the answer to this dilemma is school-age child care – a safe, secure way for children ages 5 to 13 to unwind, play, learn, and enjoy themselves.

While the need for this kind of care is greater than ever, finding the right provider can be difficult. Where do you look for centers that serve school-age children? What questions do you ask the director to make sure that a center meets your needs and provides a healthy, stimulating setting for your child?

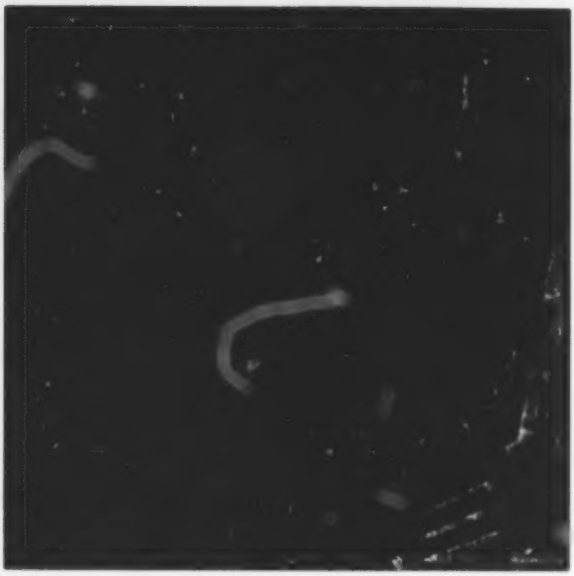
Such questions have led us, the nation's elementary and middle school principals, to develop this guide. Your youngsters' out-of-school hours are important to us, too. We hope you find this publication useful.

Sincerely,



Samuel G. Sava

Executive Director
National Association of Elementary School Principals



Who Provides School-Age Child Care?

Some communities offer a lot of choices for school-age child care; others have few. Here are some of the most common:

Schools: About one in three elementary schools provides before- and/or after-school care in the school. Sometimes, the programs are sponsored by the school (or school district); other times, by outside organizations.

Recreation Departments: Some community parks and recreation departments offer after-school care and extended summer day camps.

Youth Service Agencies: The YMCA and YWCA, Boys Clubs, Girls Clubs, Campfire, Inc. and other youth- and family-oriented groups sponsor school-age child care programs, including before- and after-school care and summer programs.

Churches and Temples: A growing number of centers of worship offer school-age child care to anyone in the community, regardless of religious affiliation.

Child Care Centers: Many child care centers also care for children before and after school, or can recommend places that do. Some child care centers at corporations and on college campuses also are expanding to provide care for school-age children.

Family Child Care Homes: Licensed providers who care for younger children may offer before-school, after-school, and summer care for school-age children as well.

In-Home Care: For those who prefer "at home" care, options include hiring neighbors, retirees, or college students. Many parents form informal co-ops, or look to local licensed family day care providers.

AFTER SCHOOL AT THE SCHOOL

PROGRAMS BASED IN SCHOOLS OFTEN OFFER A UNIQUE BENEFIT — A PARTNERSHIP BETWEEN THE SCHOOL'S PRINCIPAL AND STAFF AND THE PROGRAM'S DIRECTOR AND STAFF. WORKING TOGETHER, THEY ENSURE THAT THE PROGRAM REFLECTS SCHOOL POLICY AND BEST FULFILLS THE NEEDS OF CHILDREN AND PARENTS.

How Do I Find School-Age Child Care?

The best sources of information on before- and after-school care programs and providers are:

Schools/School Districts: Your child's principal is an excellent resource for questions about children. He or she will be acquainted with the range of programs available to students. The district office also may be a good resource for area programs.

Other Parents: Your friends, neighbors and co-workers, and the parents of your children's friends, can be great sources of information on school-age child care programs.

Local Government: Many community governments have child care departments that maintain lists of licensed child care providers.

Other Sources:

Libraries: Some community libraries keep files on child care programs in the area. Ask the reference librarian.

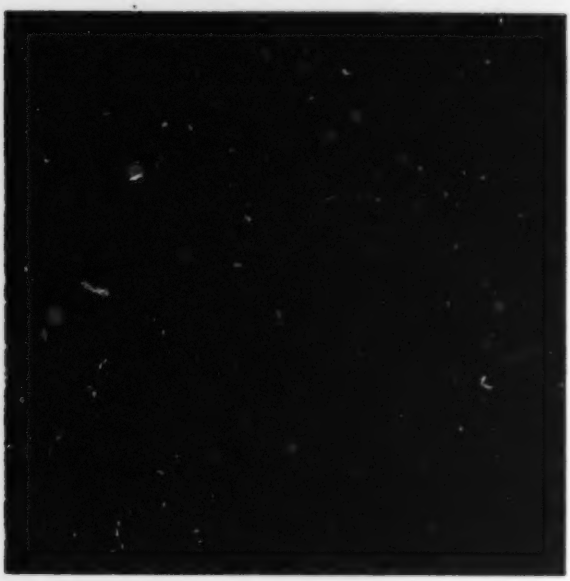
Child Care Resource and Referral Services: These services help match families with child care providers in the area. Some employers provide access to a resource and referral service as an employee benefit. If yours doesn't, try looking in the Yellow Pages under "child care," "school," or "day care." Make sure to find out, up front, if there are charges for the referral service.

Special Needs:

Finding quality before- and after-school care can be particularly challenging for those whose children have special emotional or physical needs. Often, you can get recommendations from local social service agencies, the school district office, or your child's school principal.

Second Opinions

Talk with your children about the programs you're considering. They may prefer one program over another because their friends go there, or because they like the staff or the activities better.



What Should I Look For?

While every program is different, make sure to look for:

- A caring staff that really likes children.
- Interesting and challenging activities.
- Surroundings that are healthy and safe.

Beyond these, finding the best care is a matter of determining what's important to you and your children, and finding the best match.

First, Consider Your Children:

- What kind of activities do your children enjoy most? Active, outside play? Reading? Arts and crafts? Computer games? Sports? Drama? The best programs have enough variety to accommodate all of these.

What Are the Hours, Logistics, and Costs?

- How early can you drop your children off in the morning? How late is the center open in the evening?
- Is care available when school is closed for parent conferences, vacations, holidays, and bad-weather days? Does it cost extra?
- Can your children attend during the summer months? Is the center closed certain weeks for staff training or vacations? If so, ask the director to recommend alternatives.
- Is the tuition affordable? School-age child care averages less than $2 an hour, but ranges widely depending on where you live, the services offered, and who's providing it (non-profit providers generally are the least expensive).
- What extra fees are there? What is the late fee (as high as $1 per minute after closing time)? Are you expected to pay extra for field trips, tutoring, music or sports lessons, or equipment?

PAYING THE BILL

MANY PROGRAMS HAVE A SLIDING FEE SCALE BASED ON INCOME. SOME OFFER SCHOLARSHIPS OR PUBLIC SUBSIDIES. BE SURE TO ASK IF THERE'S A DISCOUNT FOR FAMILIES WITH MORE THAN ONE CHILD IN THE PROGRAM.

What Does a Good School-Age Child Care Program Look Like?

Indoors: Some settings just "feel" right. The best setups offer:

- Enough room so children can move from one area to another without disturbing other children's activities or projects.
- Quiet areas for conversation, puzzles, reading or homework; small group areas for games, art, science projects, or dramatic play; and open areas for noisy and active indoor play.
- A cozy, "home away from home" feeling with carpets, couches, pillows, plants, and comfortable chairs.
- Safe, comfortable surroundings kept warm enough in the winter and cool enough in the summer — and bathrooms that are clean and convenient.

- Opportunities for privacy, for children to play independently without constant direct supervision.

Outdoors: Programs should make plenty of time for outdoor play, and offer:

- A clean, safe outdoor play area protected from traffic and unwanted visitors.
- Lots of room for children to be able to run around, and separate areas for active games, sports, climbing, and quiet play.
- Well-kept outdoor play equipment — enough so no one has to wait too long for a turn.

If there's not an outdoor play area on-site, find out where children go for outside activities, how often they go, and how they get there.

Shared Space

In most schools, program space — gyms, cafeterias, classrooms — is shared between teachers and child care staff. But the best arrangements allow child care programs to also use the library, computer lab, art room, and other space for supervised activity.

What's On the Schedule?

The hours before and after school should not feel structured, like "school." Instead, the mood should be relaxed, free-flowing, and full of interesting things to choose from. Look for a place that offers children their choice of activities, plenty of time to play, run around, laugh out loud, and:

Physical Activity. Indoor and outdoor sports and games help kids unleash all the energy they've stored inside them all day. Before-school warm-ups help them get ready for the day.

Mental Activity. Challenging games and projects give children the opportunity to learn new things without feeling like they're still in class.

Individual Activity. It's important for children to have quiet time to sit and think, do homework, read, sketch, or just daydream.

Social Activity. Children need time to play with old friends and make new ones, time to learn social skills, and to find out about being a leader — and a follower.

Is the Schedule Flexible?

- Is the daily schedule rigid with start and stop times for everything, or can children spend extra time on projects they're interested in, and move on to something else if they're bored?
- Do children work on special projects? Can they publish their own newspaper, or produce a field day, skit, or mini-Olympics?
- Can children participate in outside activities, like scouting, dance lessons, or Little League? If so, is transportation available?
- Are there opportunities to create plays, pottery, or other "masterpieces" that may take days or weeks to complete?

HOMEWORK

MOST PROGRAMS EMPHASIZE FUN, PHYSICAL ACTIVITY, AND RELAXATION — A REAL BREAK FROM THE SCHOOL DAY. IF YOU WANT YOUR CHILDREN TO SPEND THEIR TIME ON HOMEWORK, LOOK FOR A PROGRAM THAT OFFERS A QUIET PLACE TO WORK AND TUTORING HELP.

Does the Program Appeal to All Ages?

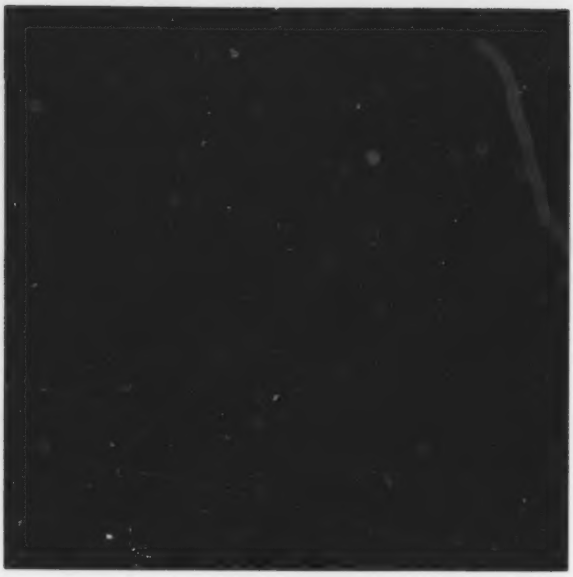
Kindergartners and preteens have very different interests and needs. Look for a program that:

- Offers different activities for different age groups — team sports for older children, building blocks for younger children.
- Provides a range of supplies and materials — a housekeeping corner for little ones, advanced board games and puzzles for the 12-year-olds. Make sure that any dangerous materials are kept safely out of young children's reach.
- Gives older children the feeling that they're not being closely supervised (even though they are).

- Introduces skills and ideas that are right for each age group — kickball for the 6-year-olds, basketball for the 10-year-olds.
- Provides space for each age group to play without interference from older or younger children, while encouraging companionship among age groups.
- If the program operates during the summer, is the schedule a continuation of the school-year program, or are there new opportunities and activities?

Television

Some families allow their kids a free range of after-school television programs. Others want the TV off-limits on school days. Make sure you know, in advance, how after-school caregivers feel about TV time, and find a program that fits your family's philosophy. (Elementary school principals recommend that parents limit their children's TV time, and that families select some shows to watch and discuss together.)

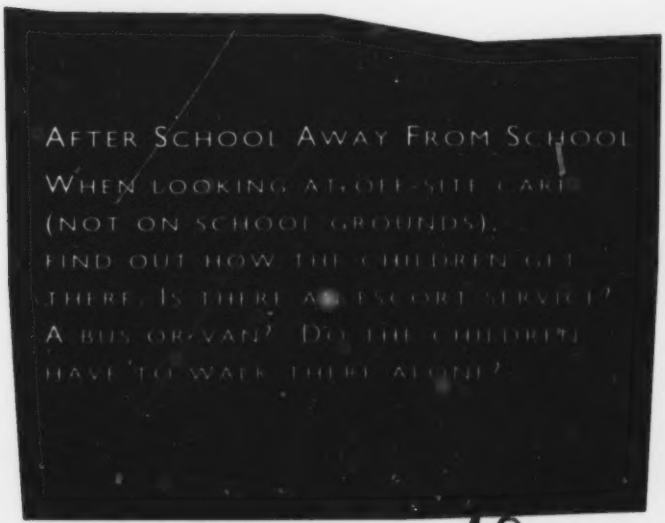


Is the Program Safe and Healthy?

Your child's safety and health are the most important considerations in selecting a care provider. Make sure to ask these questions:

- Is the program or provider licensed or accredited? While school-run programs may not be subject to state licensing, they still should meet or exceed licensing standards for programs run by others.
- Is there a careful check-in and check-out procedure so that children are always accounted for?
- Is there a telephone close by and available in case of emergencies?
- Are all play areas safe? Are hazardous materials kept locked away? Is the facility smoke-free?

- Is the staff trained in first aid and CPR? Is there a first aid kit and a list of emergency numbers nearby? Are all children coached on what to do in a fire or other emergency?
- Is water available at all times (for drinking, cooking, cleanup, and projects)?
- Are all snacks and meals nutritious? Can children get a snack when they're hungry, or do they have to wait until a scheduled meal? Do meals and snacks include lots of fruits and vegetables, and are there limits on "junk" foods and high-fat choices?
- Is there enough staff to supervise well and give enough attention to the children?
- Is the space adaptable for children with physical limitations?


After School Away From School
When looking at off-site care
(not on school grounds),
find out how the children get
there. Is there an escort service?
A bus or van? Do the children
have to walk there alone?

What About the Staff?

Your children deserve to be cared for by people who enjoy, respect, and understand them. But since it's unlikely that you'll be able to spend a lot of time interviewing each staff member, how can you tell? Here are a few tips:

- Talk to parents of children who attend and ask:

  How do their children feel about the staff? Do they enjoy them?

  Do the children feel that the staff is patient and fair and fun?

  How do they, as parents, feel? Does the staff make it a point to talk with the parents on a regular basis? Or do they hear from the staff only when there's a problem?

- Ask the director about the staff's background: What kind of experience do they have? Child development, social work, education, recreation, art, psychology? Have they worked with children before?

  Does the program sponsor training for staff? If so, what subjects are included?

  Have all current and potential staff members undergone a standard background check (criminal records)?

  Is the staff sensitive to racial, ethnic, religious, and gender differences? Do staff members appreciate all cultures and abilities and welcome all children equally?

  Ask the director about his/her background as well. The director sets the tone for the whole program. He/she should be well-qualified, sensitive, and experienced.

Staffing Changes

Staff turnover can be high and unavoidable, due to relatively low pay and unconventional hours. Ask about the turnover rate, and how children's feelings are dealt with when a staff member moves on to another job.

Can I See the Staff Members in Action?

The very best way to find out about the people who may be caring for your children is to watch them in action. Be sure to visit the program and observe the staff.

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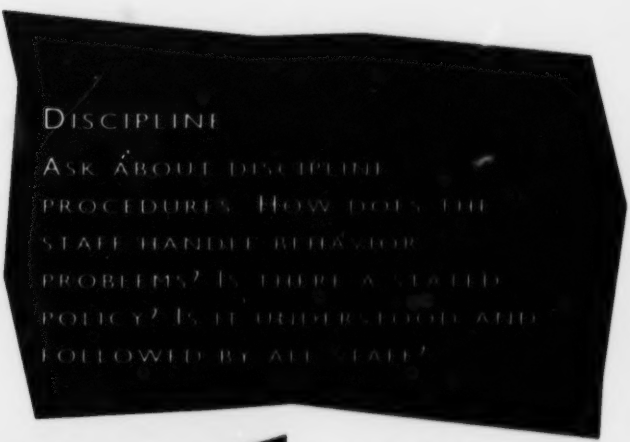
- Does the staff seem to enjoy being with the children? Are they having fun, or are they watching the clock?
- How do they handle conflicts between two or more children? Do they give the kids a chance to work out problems themselves?
- If a child needs discipline, how does the staff handle it? What if a child seems upset or angry? Are they calm and comforting?
- When a child succeeds, do they offer praise and encouragement?

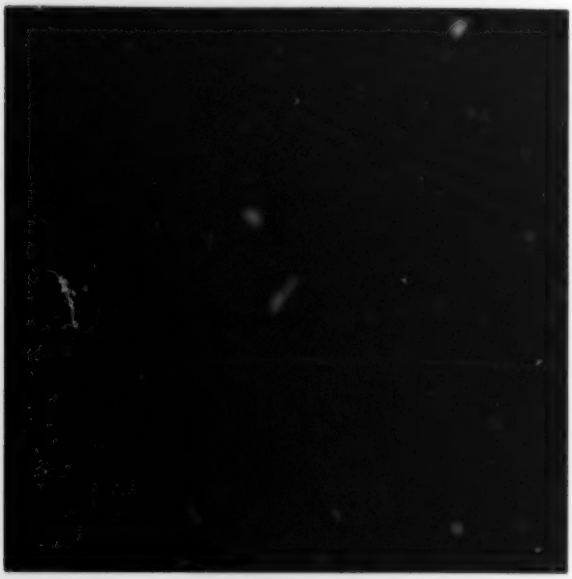
- Do they encourage children to try new activities without pressuring them?
- Do the staff members seem to enjoy working with each other?
- Do you think the staff members are good examples for your children? Do you like them? Would you like your children to spend time with them and learn from them?

The Number Question

While the number of children per adult in after-school and before-school programs varies, smaller groups and more staff often indicate a better quality program.

The National Association of Elementary School Principals recommends that there should be no more than 12 children per staff member — enough staff so the program can offer a variety of activities and children can get help when they need it.


DISCIPLINE
ASK ABOUT DISCIPLINE PROCEDURES. HOW DOES THE STAFF HANDLE BEHAVIOR PROBLEMS? IS THERE A STATED POLICY? IS IT UNDERSTOOD AND FOLLOWED BY ALL STAFF?



What Are My Responsibilities?

Before the first day at the program, talk with the director or staff about your children's likes and dislikes, strengths and weaknesses, health or dietary needs, or any special circumstances. Keep the lines of communication open. Try to talk to a staff member at least once a week. Bring up any questions or concerns and ask about the new things your children are learning and doing. Pass the staff's compliments on to your children, and add lots of your own.

Beyond that, here are some "rules" for making sure you have a great relationship with your children's care providers:

- Pick up your children on time. It's unfair to your children and the staff when you cause them to wait around after hours.
- Set aside time for dealing with problems.

Avoid the end of the day. If possible, schedule an appointment or phone conference to talk with staff or director.

- Stay involved. Make time to attend parent meetings, family/staff get-togethers or performances by the children. Offer to serve on an advisory board or to donate supplies or your time.

In the right program, children will be spending their hours and days outside of school happy, involved, and secure. And you, as a family, will come out far, far ahead.

When Do I Stop Care?

While many people think that 12- or 13-year-olds are capable of being home alone before and after school, there's really no magic age. Think seriously about the safety of your neighborhood, the distance between the school and your home, and your child's personality and maturity. If you have even the slightest doubt that your child would be safe and responsible, trust your instincts and either continue with before- and after-school care or find another safe haven, such as a neighborhood youth center or parks and recreation department program.

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